



Afghanistan Ignored
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A WAR is missing. Sadly, it is not missing from the physical location in which it is taking place, and people continue to die as it is waged. But it has largely disappeared from our national debate, and that debate has been sorely distorted as a consequence.

The war in question is in Afghanistan, and it isn't missing because it's no longer of consequence -- in fact, conditions there appear to be deteriorating -- but because of a conscious, unfortunately successful effort by the Bush administration and its conservative allies to ignore it. That's because acknowledging the war there would invalidate their charge that their political opponents are unwilling to take a forceful stand against terrorism.

During the years after World War II, academics popularized the concept of the ``big lie." This is a technique successfully used by some European regimes to manipulate the public perception of reality. It turned out that if enough people in official positions simply repeated things that were not true, and found elements in the media ready to reinforce them, lies would be believed and truths forgotten.

This approach surfaced in Vice President Dick Cheney's assertion that the defeat of Senator Joseph Lieberman in Connecticut's Democratic primary, largely but not entirely because of his support for the Iraq war, demonstrated that Democrats were unwilling to use appropriate force against terrorism. The theme has been a constant in this campaign season, repeatedly asserted by the administration and its congressional allies, and elaborated on by media figures. Their argument is that the refusal of many Democrats to support the war in Iraq shows that President Bush's opposition is unwilling to use force against terrorism.

There is, of course, one factual refutation of this partisan distortion. Every Democratic senator and representative but one voted for the war in Afghanistan. It is this war that represented America's reaction to the murders of thousands of Americans on Sept. 11 . It was the Taliban regime in Afghanistan that was sheltering Osama bin Laden. The reaction of the overall majority of Americans, including virtually all Democrats, was to support the Afghan war as a necessary act of self-defense.

But the fact that the Bush-Cheney claims that Saddam Hussein was involved in the 9/11 attacks have been totally repudiated does not stop the administration and its allies from equating willingness to combat terror with support for the war in Iraq.

Not only does support for the Afghan struggle demonstrate our willingness to resort to war in self-defense, but one of the reasons why the Iraq war does America so much harm is that it has diverted attention, resources, and support from Afghanistan. Violence is rising there, along with the drug trade, and support is eroding for what we had hoped to establish as a democratic regime.

I feel particularly strongly about this effort to obliterate the Afghan war from the national debate because I sat in a church in Raynham early last month and watched a family grieve over the death of a brave young man who had been killed there. I do not regret voting for the war in Afghanistan. But I very much regret the necessity of having to do so. The fact that I voted for the war in which that young man was killed weighs heavily on me as a reminder that while war is sometimes necessary, it is an instrument to use only with strong justification, and when alternatives are not available.

Whether or not one subscribes to the geopolitical aims that motivated the Bush administration's intervention in Iraq, it is clearly invalid to assert that support for that war is the indispensable badge of one's willingness to confront terrorism. Only by adopting the techniques of the big lie can the vice president make his case that those opposed to the Iraqi war fail to understand the importance of a firm response to terrorists. In fact, given the deleterious effect it has had on our effort in Afghanistan, and the enormous boost it has given to anti-American forces around the world, the big truth is that the Iraq war has damaged our ability to fight terrorism.

Americans were united in their response to the mass murders of 9/11. The war in Iraq has weakened the United States internationally and divided it domestically, while draining needed resources. It is precisely because the Iraq war is not defensible on any other terms that the Bush/Cheney approach uses the big lie to defend the war in Iraq on grounds that in fact describe the war in Afghanistan.